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Socrates

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Socrates

Socrates argued that the unexamined life is not worth living. What this means is we are so ignorant that we are guilty of criminal negligence how to lead our lives, unless we do our due diligence by philosophizing.

Dangerous life

Socrates lived in dangerous times. He survived three tours of duty as an infantry soldier, all three ending in battles that were military defeats for Athens, two of them disastrous. Returning from Potidaea a fifth of Socrates' army was killed in combat near Spartolus, including all three generals in command. And at Amphipolis about a fourth was killed, including both commanders. Those in the field alongside Socrates recognized him for life-saving bravery. Socrates was back in Athens for the second and third outbreaks of the plague that killed between a third and a fourth of the population. When Athens lost the war, vindictive Corinthians called for the execution of all its adult males. Sparta permitted them to live, installing a murderous tyranny. Again Socrates survived, despite his disobedience to a direct order to make an arrest. And he lived through the bloody insurgency that eventually restored democratic self-rule.

Socrates' public image kills him. On trial for his life at age seventy, Socrates calls attention to the fact that many jurors had heard "since they were children" that Socrates "did not believe in the city's gods" and "taught others these things." With Anytus's powerful support, a young zealot named Meletus successfully prosecutes him on a rarely-used charge of "corrupting the young and believing in new gods, not the gods that the city believes in." The jury, composed of hundreds of fellow citizens, convicts him and sentences him to death. The underlying reason he will be convicted, Socrates says, is not the easily-refuted legal charges but his public image. His public behavior has been notoriously outside of the norms of decent society, making the slanders of atheism and corruption plausible.

Courtroom defense

Unfortunately, to defend himself against the underlying reason, Socrates violates the norms of courtroom behavior. He calls as witness for his defense "the god at Delphi"—none other than Apollo—causing uproar in the court. Socrates tells a story in introducing the divine testimony about himself. "I suppose you all know Chaerephon. Well, he was my friend since we were young. Once Chaerephon went to Delphi and dared to request a divine answer. He asked, you know, whether anyone was wiser than I. The oracle answered from on high: 'No one is wiser'." The answer puzzles Socrates (at age 40, at a guess):

When I heard this, I wondered about it: "What in the world is the god saying, and what is he hinting at within the riddle? For I am well aware of being wise in nothing big or small. What is he saying when he states I am as wise as possible? He's not lying, of course—that's not his way."

If Socrates lacked reverence to the god, he would have an easy solution to the riddle. The statement about his wisdom might simply be false: either no god was speaking there, or the god was lying. But Socrates is reverent, hence puzzled, and so his life changes. This change is comparable in its historical significance to Moses' experience of a burning bush or Jesus and the dove descending.

Unable for perhaps five years to solve the riddle, Socrates eventually decides to find a counter-example among those with a reputation for wisdom, thinking that “there, if anywhere, I should test the utterance and show the oracle: ‘This man is wiser than I, but you said I was wisest’.” Socrates is in the position of soldiers who are unable to understand their orders and must return to the commander to say, “You stated X, but X conflicts with Y!” Respectful soldiers are not thereby presuming that the commanding officer is wrong, or even that the orders are at fault for being unintelligible. They seek understanding by explaining why they do not understand. Socrates says that he turned to the task of finding a counter-example with “great reluctance,” wishing no doubt to avoid the asocial behavior of calling out people for cross-examination.

But Socrates fails to find a counter-example and is unable to disprove the truth of the oracle. Of course Socrates is not able to examine every human being. But he makes a sample of different types of people: in the first case political leaders, who take it upon themselves to advise the city about its best interests, in the second case the poets who write about matters of ultimate human concern, and in the last case the craftworkers, who alone of the three classes knew some fine things, but not that on which all else depends.

Eventually Socrates solves the divine riddle. He distinguishes three levels of wisdom. The highest level is “real wisdom,” which is the property of God, not human beings. The middle level is to be “wisest among human beings,” a level is reached by anyone who, like Socrates, “knows that he does not possess real wisdom of any value.” The lowest level is “not being wise, but seeming wise, especially to oneself.” Socrates is as wise as a mortal can be—*no one is wiser*—because only God possesses wisdom and because Socrates, aware of his ignorance, is wiser than people who are ignorant of their ignorance.

Socrates’ legal defense, then, is to justify his notoriously offensive public behavior as a mission from god. His reverence required him to figure out God’s riddling oracle, and after figuring it out, his reverence led him to try to demonstrate the truth of that oracle.

Due diligence

In addition to religious obedience to God’s command, Socrates gives the jury a secular reason why he must philosophize: to live a life of philosophical examination is “the greatest good”—a good so great that “the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being.” *Not worth living* means we are better off dead if we do not spend our lives philosophizing. This is a wild statement. If we accept it, our lives will change. Our first priority in life would be to live as Socrates did, cross-examining others and ourselves about what human excellence is.

Can Socrates’ wild statement be true? Let us grant Socrates that we are not experts in living properly as human beings. How important is it to try to get that expertise? As an analogy, imagine the sort of superhero movie in which you wake up to discover you have an immense power to rescue yourself and others from danger, a power that, wrongly used, causes wretchedness worse than death. Let’s say you wake up in a hospital bed, and when you wiggle your toes the doctors get nasty head wounds. You reach out to help them and their fingers fall off. I suppose we might agree that beyond such sensational physical effects are psychological damages and rescues—a movie that takes up the psychological beyond the physical would be an even better analogy. In such horrifying circumstances, the question for such heroes is: what to do? Imagine these heroes, without knowing how to manage their superpower, nevertheless trying to help themselves or their friends. No matter how good their intentions might be, they are still guilty of reckless negligence, like people shooting blindly in the dark or driving vehicles while

intoxicated. The principle establishing criminal negligence is that a reasonable person in the same situation would have foreseen the possibility of harm to another. On the other hand, if they do their due diligence, they are free of the guilt of negligent wrongdoing. Certainly the ignorant superheroes, trying to understand their powers, might still harm others. Those harms are of course to be regretted, but our heroes are at least free of any guilt associated with that harm. Like a corporation whose practice has harmed a consumer or employee, they are guilty if and only if they failed their due diligence.

This sort of thought experiment and the principle of due diligence indicate that our heroes must make the first priority to search for appropriate expertise how to manage their superpower. Just so, Socrates' message is a wakeup call to us. Human beings have frightening powers to harm themselves and others. It is the height of folly and reckless negligence for us to try to live in such ignorance. Those who lack expertise at how to manage their lives must do their due diligence and make the search for wisdom—'philosophy' is Socrates' word for this search—the first priority. Due diligence saves us from any such guilt.

Worse than the movie superhero, human beings tend to be ignorant even of their own ignorance. The evidence for this double ignorance is that we tend to have strong convictions, sometimes violently and even cruelly strong, about personal or political decisions. The only remedy Socrates has for such people, as Plato shows in his Socratic dialogues, is to persuade them to share their wisdom by explaining basic principles any expert ought to know. If they are expert, they ought to know what a human excellence like courage or friendship is, and so they ought to be able to give an account of them, just as we would expect of any expert. In conversation with Socrates, they are unable to give such accounts without contradicting themselves. Philosophers ever since have been unable to reach consensus on how to avoid contradiction in our own accounts of these cardinal human virtues.

I sometimes hear the following objection: "Socrates is right; we are profoundly ignorant how to live well. But Socrates by his own admission never found this expertise, and there is no sign that any of the smart philosophers after him found it. It's a safe bet that I could spend my life looking for it and never find it. So let's adopt better priorities and not waste our lives on a fruitless search!" This reasoning is like a hunter who reasons, "Our hunting permits will expire before it grow light enough to see; let's not waste our time here. Start shooting in the dark!"

There is an error in this sort of objection, whether by a hunter or a human being. The excellent hunter is not the hunter who shoots but the one who shoots right. Likewise the excellent human being is not the one who lives but the one who lives right. And there's a further similarity. The excellent hunter *loves* hunting right and loves shooting only insofar as it is part of right hunting. Likewise an excellent human being *loves* living right and loves anything else only insofar as it is part of right living. Notice that a premise of the objection is that the life spent philosophizing is a life wasted. This premise is false. The life spent philosophizing is a life that perfectly fits our human condition.

Socrates, after being sentenced to death at his trial, tries to comfort those—nearly half of the jurors—who voted to acquit him. He argues that a conviction that his death is bad is one more instance of double ignorance: ignorant of death's nature, we nevertheless are convinced it is bad. As part of argument, he shares his own, admittedly ignorant, vision of an "inconceivably most happy" eternity: it would be an everlasting afterlife of philosophical examination of all the souls with him. Socrates can imagine nothing happier than to philosophize forever. Socrates has learned to love not living but living right as a human being in a condition of perpetual ignorance.

He teaches us to devote our lives to philosophy and to love living right, that is, to love philosophizing as heavenly bliss.

Changed life

To accept Socratic philosophy is life changing. Like an evangelical conversion, it involves the recognition that one's previous life incurred guilt, that a change of priorities is needed, and that the change will save one's soul from guilt and make life worth living. We recognize that our previous actions were culpably negligent. As a result, we make it our first priority to try to find out what human excellence is, and to spend our life in that examination.

But how is such a life possible? How can a Socratic philosopher make any decisions? Academic philosophers did not exist in Socrates' time. There were no liberal arts colleges employing professors and offering philosophy majors. Living a Socratic life does not require such academic trimmings. Socrates did not withdraw from society to do philosophy, nor did he commit suicide to avoid harming others. He did his civic or social duties of soldiering in wars, holding public office when selected by lot, and by marrying and fathering children. In addition, he made a significant investment of time in his philosophical examination of others, enough to cause him to live in what he described as poverty. Such actions were both a perpetual search for wisdom and a sort of evangelical missionary work to save others from the guilt of non-philosophy.

Socrates calls for a similar devotion to philosophy from us. The devotion does not release us from our roles in life. As converts, we no longer live to win or enjoy love, money or prestige. As far as possible, given the constraints of civic or social duty, we live to learn what human excellence is. We know we do not have godlike expertise at living and follow Socrates' practice of searching for that expertise: "each day to make arguments, engage in dialogue, and carefully examine human excellence and related topics." Such actions not only save us from guilt, but they also benefit our communities, by trying to bring others from the guilt of negligence to the guilt-free condition of philosophy.